

Worker bees keep Kenai National Wildlife Refuge running smoothly

by Karen McGahan

The responsibility for the Refuge Notebook articles is rotated among the different departments at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. This week it lands on the administrative staff.

Well, the manager and his next in command can only write so many, so it has been delegated on down the line. This time it has come all the way down to the refuge clerk. After much deliberation, I decided that how our phone system or the filing were kept up wouldn't be tantalizing enough to keep the interest of the readers.

But what would? Would bees keep their interest? Maybe the "worker bees." Let me tell you about this little known species on the refuge.

Our permanent staff is divided into five different departments and runs just over 30 employees in the winter. This number explodes to more than 80 in the summer. This number doesn't include our numerous volunteers—a little known-about, but invaluable resource of the refuge.

Volunteers work for only their own satisfaction and the appreciation of the staff and community. Non-residents may get a small stipend for food. Wonderful people these volunteers.

The staff and volunteers originate from all over the United States and every once in awhile the globe. Like our origins, we even choose to live all over the Kenai Peninsula. Our employees live from Sterling to Nikiski to Clam Gulch, with one dedicated employee living in Homer and keeping a place here during the week.

I personally have a great respect and admiration for everyone who devotes his or her career to this refuge. The refuge encompasses lands from Chickaloon, along the tidal flats of Turnagain Arm, down to a section of land on the south side of Kachemak Bay.

Let's start with the biology staff, one of my favorites. These are some of our most committed and passionate employees on the refuge. Their work includes the best and worst that Alaska has to offer.

These people survey, track, collar and tag a variety of animals on the refuge. Bears, caribou, lynx and a variety of birds are all a source of enthusiasm for this

wonderful group of people. Even the bugs and beetles get a great deal of attention from the Biology Department.

These people accomplish their goals by getting outdoors and utilizing all modes of transportation. They use boats, planes, snowmachines and, most often, their own feet. They can be seen on all the great summer days observing and tracking their favorite animals.

What's the downside? They are also out floating the waters and observing on all the rainy, cold and snowy days too. Personally, I would like to trade positions with them only on the good days.

Let's move on to Visitor Services. This is our largest department, and staff are just as committed to their goals as the others. This group of people tries to balance visitor services, or people, with maintaining the land and animals.

The 14 refuge campgrounds are maintained and managed by this department. Your kids can go on field trips to learn about wetlands, fire programs and "leave no trace" camping because of these people.

Do you want to volunteer for a project? See Visitor Services. This is the group that knows all four corners of the refuge and can answer almost any question about the refuge, except those pertaining to a specific critter (that's biology). Staff can issue you a commercial, trapping or bear-baiting permit, and they are devoted to making your experience in the refuge an enjoyable one.

They also encourage and support the Friends of the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. An amazing collection of people dedicated to supporting the refuge in a variety of ways. Consider becoming a member of this group.

This department also houses our law enforcement personnel. A committed group of individuals that look out for the regulations. These folks might dampen a few people's experiences, "here's your ticket", but if you adhere to the regulations, an encounter with them can be quite informational or even pleasant.

They also are involved in numerous search and res-

cues each summer. These adventures include animals as well as people. Just ask an officer or a biologist, birds are much more elusive than people.

These people in brown are happy to answer any questions you might have about the refuge. They might have badges and guns, but they are out there to ensure public safety and to help your visit be more enjoyable.

Enough Visitor Services. It's exhausting just thinking about all they do. Let's move on to the "hottest" department.

What's the "hottest" department on the refuge? Well, Fire Management, of course. What an exciting area of the refuge. Most people don't realize that the refuge even has a fire program. This group is quite small, but effective.

In the winter, only about three people staff the fire crew, which expands to approximately 10 devoted workers in the summer. This group works hard to keep the area free from one of nature's most devastating elements: fire.

They coordinate with many different agencies that are helping to educate the public on fire prevention. FireWise is a growing and much needed prevention measure in this time of the spruce bark beetle. They are very active outdoors working on preventative fire lines, outlining and implementing prescribed burns, (excellent for our massive moose), and helping where they are needed anywhere in the nation on wildfires.

Fire staff also help keep people warm in the winter by maintaining the personal-use woodcut area on Funny River Road.

While their office is away from the main visitor center area, they make a significant contribution to maintaining the refuge.

When you think of the wildlife refuge, you probably don't think of our final two departments: Maintenance and Administration. What could a maintenance worker or administrative worker contribute to maintaining wildlife and lands?

Well, a great deal actually.

The Maintenance department is headed by an Operations Specialist. This person is also the oil and gas operation contact and law enforcement.

Now that's a full plate.

He or she supervises six to eight employees. These employees have more than they can handle at times, grading roads for the public to drive on, keeping vehicles running to get crews to their work sites, and

maintaining everything from boats to the buildings, to keeping the wells working in the campgrounds. Without the maintenance crew, a lot of work might not get done.

The Administration staff is headed by two people, the refuge manager and the deputy refuge manager. These two are ultimately responsible for everything related to the refuge. They do everything from reviewing Environmental Impact Statements—stimulating reading I assure you—to getting out and helping put in and take out the public-use boardwalk at Moose Range Meadows. Yet, they are never too busy to discuss any concerns that the public might have.

They also supervise the remainder of the administrative staff. What do we do? We can do it all. Well, just about.

Between the four of us, we can purchase anything the departments need to do their jobs, keep their computers up and running, answer any and all of the personnel's questions, radio dispatch, copy, file and find any paper or other item the staff needs to work more efficiently.

We can even make an awesome cup of coffee. We are talented, but then again I might be a little biased. As for your questions, we can't answer them all, but we try to get you to someone who can.

I only just briefly touched on what each department in the refuge does. I hope that if you have questions or there is something that you would like to see in the Refuge Notebook series that you will call and make the suggestion.

There is a wealth of knowledge on a variety of subjects that can be taken from the employees here. So, if you would like to see an article on anything from public-use cabins, to a specific critter, or even the intricacies of the refuge filing system, please call or e-mail us at kenai@fws.gov with your suggestions.

Finally, the next time you are out enjoying the facility, please take a brief moment to think about the "worker bees" who are dedicated to helping make your experience the best possible.

Now, wasn't that more exciting than learning about how our phones work?

Karen McGahan is the refuge clerk for the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. She lives in Nikiski with her husband, Elton, golden retriever, Missy, and Springer spaniel, Maddy. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://kenai.fws.gov>.